Pioneers And Pets

My simple life was a model of the 'American Dream'. My father and mother made it happen. They were part of the 'Greatest Generation'- tempered by war and the depression years. They embodied the frugal, can-do spirit that gave rise to the 'Baby Boomers' of the late 1950's - 60's. It was classic, it was modern, it was progress.

My brother Brian and I rolled around on the backseat of the moss green 1952 Oldsmobile, that was pulling a 40 ft. trailer. My father's steely nerves guided his new family from the soft green rolling hills of Millersburg, Ohio to the crunchy gold vistas of Southern California. The promise of the 'Mother Road - Route 66', pulled many young families far, far from their roots. For my father, Boyd Eugene Low, the tour in Korea was less of a challenge compared to moving his pretty young wife and two little kids across country – with no destination or job in mind.

Before reaching the end of Route 66, my folks drove into the pleasant small town of Corona, CA and settled in a trailer park next to some railroad tracks. With little more than a high school diploma and a DD Form 214 issued by the army stating his basic job skills, my father parlayed them with his 'can-do' attitude into steady work to care for his new family.

In a few short years, my father found his way from warehouse forklift driver to apprentice draftsman with the City of Riverside. In another couple of years, the engineering and drafting firm, Webb Associates hired dad and kept him busy for the next 30 plus years.

As soon as possible dad moved his family out of the ever-shrinking trailer and into a simple 5 room, 1920's Sears kit home. It was located on a dead-end street next to the Riverside Municipal airport. The double lot became the springboard for building projects that would span 45 years.

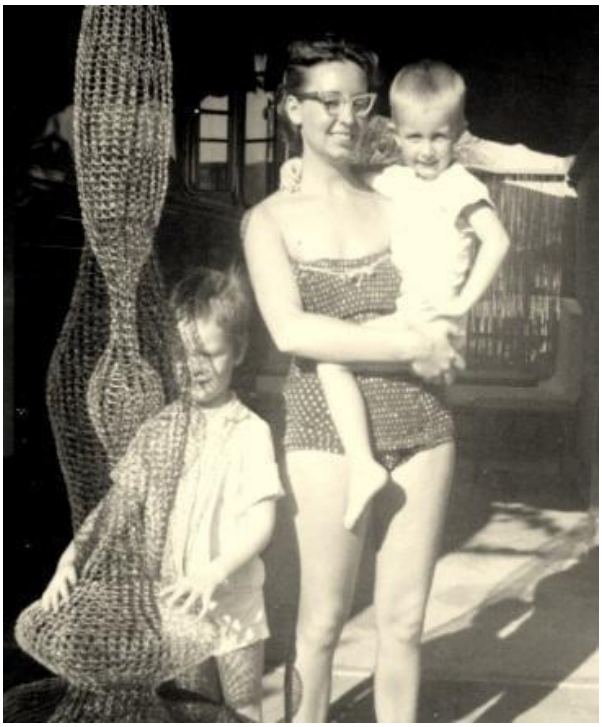
Webb Assoc. had plenty of work in the building boom years and needed to expand their operation. The 1930's stucco sided house next door was to be leveled, making room for another office wing and additional parking. My father stepped up and bought the house for $1500 and planned to move it onto the lot next door to us. First, he had a huge hole dug and a cement slab poured. Cement walls were erected up to ground level in the front yard that sloped to create a walkout basement in the back. House movers hauled the stucco building about 3 miles through town, lifting electrical lines and holding up traffic while trying to maneuver several tight turns and steep grades. Finally, the house was rolled up onto the prepared lot and gently lowered with hydraulic jacks onto huge railroad ties stacked up from the basement floor. Steel beams used in transport were removed and replaced with wood beams. Our 'new' home was gently positioned onto the prepared cement block basement. After the dust settled, the overall cost of both houses and both lots was about $4500. This was 1965 and the REAL work was about to begin!

As in our pioneer's past, nothing is as satisfying as building your own home along with raising a family. Little was hired out – dad constructed walls, ceilings, floors, did the plumbing, electrical, dug a septic line, shingled the roof, built a carport, lathe patio, block walls and laid tons of cement for the driveway, steps, walks and patios. Wife and kids provided a fair measure of work over the years, but dad still did the lion's share of the tough stuff.

While dad did the hard labor, mom – Virginia Kay (Hodgeson) was bogged down with the 'soft' labor. She never took up driving and was homebound, raising two kids. Mom would sew clothes, curtains, make rugs, learn upholstery and how to refinish furniture, tend a garden, feed everybody, clean up afterwards plus normal household chores – she was overworked but happy. Still, mom and dad found time for family road trips. We would go to San Diego Zoo, La Brea tar pits, Balboa Park, and Laguna Beach – anywhere to expand our new horizons! Even the local dump! Brian and I were easy to please.

These day trips especially gave mom an outlet for her creative energies. She and dad took ceramic classes at the local college, learned scuba diving, stained glass and welding. But it was fiber arts - which mom took as her own for the rest of her life – requiring frequent trips to the fabric store.

On one trip to the Museum of Modern Art, mom was mesmerized by the woven wire technique demonstrated by Ruth Asawa. It was simple yet elegant in the way she portrayed her creations in undulating organic forms. Mom decided to make her own and she created a 6-foot tall, two-tone wire sculpture; easily mistaken for being an Asawa original. It hung in a place of honor by the front door of their handsome home on Neil Street.



The kids on this dead-end street were primarily white and Hispanic, all from working class families. Since mom did not drive, our home was considered a haven for the neighborhood kids to hang out. Dad had built a jungle gym, a zipline and pool hall – the creation of which became legend!

Our Sunday routine did not include going to church – swap meets were our family's spiritual gathering place. "*The family that swaps together, flops together*!" Yard and estate sales were also coveted affairs. The greatest acquisition involved an iconic Brunswick/Collander/Blake 'Jewel' pool table.

While the family was looking through a yard sale, my dad, Boyd overheard a conversation about an old pool table for sale. He obtained a phone number to call and planned to buy this table sight unseen. The table was in Provo, Utah so Boyd and his visiting brother Bruce borrowed a truck and drove up there over a long weekend. After locating the address, he knocked on the door and was met by an elderly lady.

"*I've come for the pool table we talked about on the phone*." The lady was hesitant, saying, "*Well, my husband isn't here, and he doesn't think we should sell it...*"

"*Why*?" Boyd asked in a mild panic. "*Well,"* the lady began*, "if it breaks you may not buy it."*

Boyd hands the lady the asking price of $75. "*Here*," he says, "*if we break it, we've bought it.*" The lady relents and leads them to the basement where a pristine, turn-of-the-century Brunswick slate top pool table stood. Within an hour and a half, they had dismantled the over 800 lb. table and loaded it into the truck; covering it with a tarp.

While wrestling with their prize, the lady relayed the story of the table. The local Brigham Young University was throwing out 2 of these tables and her husband rescued this one before it went to the landfill. It still had its dark, original varnish.

On the way home, the brothers encountered a roadblock with a Game & Fish warden checking for hunters and deer tags. Dad rolled down the truck window, and the warden asked, "*What's under the tarp?"* With a big old grin Boyd says, "*A pool table!*" He was waved through with a suspicious grimace, without needing to prove his trophy was only made of wood.

Back home in Riverside, Boyd and wife Kay carefully stripped away the ugly dark varnish to reveal a glowing golden oak. For the next 40 years, the 'Jewel' resided in the basement of the house that Boyd built; entertaining a generation of neighborhood kids on the dead-end of Neil St. (see footnote)

Of the neighbors I recall most fondly, it was the childless couple that lived next-door. Mr. and Mrs. Stover had this long, dilapidated shed along our property line, that helped hold up a sagging chain link fence. A big hole the size of a softball had been chewed into the shingled siding, just above the fence line. Old English ivy covered everything. Inside the shed were years of accumulated crap – literally. It may have housed chickens at one time, then was used for storage. Its main purpose was to shelter generations of

neighborhood possums. They came and went through that chewed out hole; wandering the neighborhood at night; helping themselves to the Purina cat chow mom left out for all the local creatures to enjoy.

I did so enjoy the creatures! We always had cats – because strangers would drive to the end of our street, open the car door, and toss out a kitty to fend for itself. My folks spent a small fortune trapping the poor babies, having them spayed or neutered and returned to live out their lives in relative peace.

The idea of fending for oneself was of no consolation for me. One evening while I watched Marlin Perkins host Mutual of Omaha's 'Wild Kingdom', a few African hunters were out on the trail looking for dinner. Seeing them throw a spear into a zebra at a watering hole sucked the air out of my 7-year-old lungs. When I caught my breath there followed wailing and sobs as I ran out the front door. I am sure my brother told my folks what had set me off. I remember dad sitting with me out on the front curb, trying to explain that the tribe members had to eat and that is just how it was. Mom was a bit more pragmatic upon my return into the house, stating simply, "*Don't be so sensitive!"*

That little episode began with the' great pet distraction'. Starting with a hamster and a store-bought cage, I learned firsthand how gratifying it was to be a squeaky wheel! I am not saying I whined or cried for more pets to sooth me – I did not have to, because I lived next door to the city dog catcher!

Every now and then I'd hear Mr. Stover's husky voice calling me from the driveway and I would hit the screen door running. He never brought over a dog or another cat; but most everything else was fair game for the little girl next door – reptiles and rabbits mostly. The rabbits I could never figure out what sex they were until after a litter of baby bunnies appeared. They sure were cute! Mom and dad helped them find homes as soon as possible, to keep accidents from happening again.

As for reptiles, the selection was quite varied: desert tortoises, an iguana, and a South American Teague. Lee was a handsome shiny black and gold speckled lizard. He was a 3 foot, bright eyed, swaggering, tongue flicking clown. Rub a finger along one side of his

belly and he'd lean into your hand and close his eyes. When Lee was not raiding the pet food bowls, he enjoyed snoozing in the sunlight like the cats. The south side of the house had only one window, and during the winter months the family cat would hog the pool of light to herself. When Lee had the run of the house, we could tell where he was as long as he stayed on the hardwood floors. His long toenails clicked rhythmically as he sauntered around the house. But when he moved onto the carpeting in the south stairwell, he was as quiet as a mouse. I saw what Lee was up to. He saw the cat from 2 rooms away, snoozing peacefully in the sunlight. Straight as an arrow he heads for the sleeping cat; his long tongue darting side to side like a blind man waving his cane. Creeping over the carpet, ever closer to the sleeping cat, Lee hesitates within inches of the snoring lump of fur.

"ERRROOOOW !!!" Lee's forked tongue grazed the cat's back and launched kitty into midair. Bounding away in a huff, the cat leaves the lizard stone still from her sudden departure. Lee looked around wondering where the cat went. Satisfied, Lee slides into the pool of sunlight, flat on his belly, splaying all four legs out sideways. With a big sigh he closed his eyes, and I believe I saw a bit of a smile.

My mother, bless her heart, tolerated my pets, if I kept them under control. She answered the doorbell one afternoon, to a salesman peddling who knows what. As the salesman began his spiel, he stopped in midsentence, eyes open wide and took a few

steps back from the screen door. Mom followed the man's stare behind her to see that Lee had come waltzing up to the door at her feet to see what all the noise was about.

As cool a pet as Lee was, it was the snakes Mr. Stover brought to me that held my fascination. They were perfect in their symmetry and mysterious in their movements. They were forever alert with unblinking eyes, and a fidgety tongue that could tell them all they needed to know. Silent, unless frightened, they also heard nothing. Their world was one of peace and quiet, still they could feel the vibrations of the world around them. They would never know a leash, harness, or collar – they seemed to exist in another dimension very alien to our own.

The first snake Mr. Stover brought me was a snappy little gopher (or bull) snake. Frightened by the hands of behemoths, the little snake huffed and hissed, wiggling her best to escape. My folks never forbade me to have any pet once I laid hands on it. The trick was to beg my patient father to build me just one more cage!

My menagerie included: rabbits, rats, mice, hamsters, goldfish, mud puppies, turtles, tortoises, an iguana, Teague, snakes, anoles, an alligator, crow, and seagull. Fortunately, not all at once. Their care was totally my responsibility, and they reacted to me in an honest, genuine manner. I was unwittingly learning lessons about life, love and loss that would help me the rest of my life.

However, this foundation was about to endure its first major crack.

FOOTNOTE ---- The Franklin Mint created a miniature rendition of the Brunswick 'Jewel' for collectors.

Boyd's son Brian eventually took possession of the table when his parents moved to Arizona in 2006. Brian subsequentially sold the 'Jewel' to Marshak's; a dealer of antique pool tables; for $11,500! Sadly, the dealer elected to return the table to its original dark finish.